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ABSTRACT

There appears to be a problem in the way students in introductory, nonmajor literature courses read poetry that affects the way they write about it. One widely accepted belief among students is that there is a hidden but identifiable meaning in the poem that they are supposed to discover. The problem with this strategy is that most students lack the contexts of interpretation that most professional critics possess. Reader-response theory seems to provide an acceptable method of analysis because it values the personal associations and themes that readers bring to their reading of a poem. Another approach meriting consideration is the transactional theory, which seeks to integrate the discipline of close reading with the openness of personal response. Although New Criticism deals with elements such as rhyme, rhythm, and repetition, its emphasis on the effects of language may call attention to such devices in excess of what is required for an understanding of the poem. However, semiotics, which treats language as a system of signs, may be the most appropriate method of analysis because it increases students' awareness of the fact that poems consist of something besides the thoughts and feelings of the poet. Ideally, students should learn to articulate their conceptions of what poetry is and how one reads it, and then test those conceptions against their reading experience. (DF)

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Beyond Interpretation: Writing about Reading a Poem

What I want to do in the next twenty minutes is offer a brief account of an intellectual odyssey I've been on for the last few years. I've been in quest of a theoretical foundation for a pedagogy which would enable my students and I to understand what happens when we read a poem, and which might also enable us to learn to read all over again. To adapt a line from Marge Piercy, the goal would be perhaps, "to unlearn how not to read"—for I have been coming to the uncomfortable conclusion that interpretation as we have traditionally taught it (or at least as our students seem to have learned it from us) is actually a way of not reading.

I want here to trace the unfolding of this notion and I'll start with where my students are at the beginning of each new term in the introductory non-major literature courses I typically teach. There is a persistent problem in the ways students in these classes go about reading poetry, which is in part a function of the theories which implicitly inform their reading, but which is also in part a product of the ways they have learned to write about poetry.

One student, Steve, indicates the difficulty as he describes his conception of "reading":

> Working out a "reading" of this poem, or any poem for me, is a systematic analysis of the poem. I guess you could compare this to the task of finding out the identity of an unknown compound in a chemistry lab. Sometimes you can tell what it is with one look, other times you have to break it down into its components and look at each part separately. Hopefully, when you find out what each component is you can put them all together to discover the identity of your unknown. Perhaps one caution would be, to be careful not to force an identity upon the unknown....

New-critical assumptions about objective meaning in texts may have been moribund for some time in professional criticism, but they are clearly still alive, if not very well, in the essays of our students. Steve's chemical metaphor expresses what seems still to be the conventional wisdom about what it means to read a poem: there is an unknown but identifiable meaning,

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hidden or disguised by the poet, and it is the business of the reader to find it. One should beware, however, of committing the affective fallacy of reading one's own identity into the poem. One difficulty with this reading strategy for my students is that, whereas it could be said to have "worked" for professional new critics—those whose knowledge of literary traditions and conventions allowed them to believe they were reading the "real poem"—it strands students who lack those contexts of interpretation in a position of relative powerlessness before the text.

Another student writer, Sandy, testifies to the damage of trickled-down new-criticism when he describes his past experience with poetry:

> What has impressed me most deeply about so much of the poetry I have encountered is its utter inaccessibility/meaninglessness. I suppose that the fact that most poetry leaves me with the sense that I have missed completely what the poet was trying to say, means that the poetry had meaning at the very least because it left me with that sense. In any case, being left with the sense of having missed something meaningful is very unsatisfying. Poetry leaves eme unsatisfied because I don't know how to understand it while wanting to be able to make sense of it. Poetry is a realm of meaning to which I lack access because of my own shortcomings....

Sandy's handicap is, of course, not any shortcoming of his but rather the conception of poetry as "a realm of meaning," a realm from which, as a non-specialist reader, he is necessarily excluded. And it is important to stress that this is the conception which traditional pedagogy has enforced. But it has not been entirely hegemonic, outside of school anyway. Sandy recalled one highly pleasurable and memorable experience of poetry:

> When younger, I very much enjoyed Poe's "The Raven." I remember vividly my mother reading it aloud to me and my sisters. Thinking back, I realize how powerfully its rhythm and rhyme affected me. Poe must have used the poetic medium well, for every time Mom would get to the part where the raven qoth "nevermore" shivers would run down my spine. I remember that it was one of just a few poems I ever heard read aloud, and the stark image of a man hunched over a desk in a cold, dark room with a raven perched on the door is perhaps the only poetic image that has stayed with me for so long. I think that its rhyming, its stark imagery, its cold rhythm, and the fact that it was read out loud are the reasons this poem had a lasting effect on me.

One challenge for a more complete literary pedagogy would be to regain and reaffirm this kind of pleasure in the full range of poetic effects.

But the new critical conception stands in the way and has to be confronted directly. It will not be enough to cajole students out of meaning-hunting by asking why a poet would want to hide his meaning, or by choosing poems in which there is little room for a meaning to hide. (The red wheelbarrow can be made to carry a large and varied freight of significances.) What students such as Steve and Sandy need is an opportunity to develop other, more empowering reading strategies and thereby to form other conceptions of what it means to read a poem. And what I find I need in order to be able to design courses which offer such an opportunity is an ongoing theoretical challenge to my own new-critical training.

Current reader-response theory would seem to provide a way forward. Whereas new criticism insisted on the self-sufficiency of the text and branded as fallacious any reading which drew on material from outside of it, reader-response values precisely the personal associations and themes which readers bring with them to their encounter with a poem. It has re-empowered readers, and particularly non-professional readers, through its re-discovery of what now seems as though it ought always to have been obvious: that there is no other way to read than by reading into a text. Literally this is so in that words are only marks on a page until the reader animates them with the life of her reading. In doing so, not only does she decode words and activate their shared connotations, the reader also brings to them the history of her own associations with those words, the "feeling-tones" peculiar to her. And as she reads, she supplies larger contexts from her past experience, including her reading experience, which allow her to relate to the poem and make sense of it.

To demonstrate to students that it is their activity as readers which evokes a poem and constructs its meanings is to offer them a sense of access, an opportunity to bring themselves—and all that they have thought and felt and been—to the poem. It also invites attention to the reading process itself. Students can study how they work as readers, what strategies they use, what contexts they bring to their performance of a poem. The priority of the reader's role ought at the same time to impose a responsibility to pay attention to the workings of language, since without their doing so they cannot fully perform this particular poem. What tends to happen in practice—at least in the practice of theorists like David Bleich and Norman Holland—is that texts disappear from view after they have served as springboards for personal recollection or psychological exploration. And in the classroom (in my classroom anyway), students are quick to translate the individualism of reader-response principles into a license to make the text mean whatever they want. Steve, for example, readily replaced his chemical theory of interpretation with an equally conventional assertion of an unlimited openness—a new critic's nightmare of the affective fallacy run wild:

> In this poem [Blake's "The Sick Rose"] a lot of symbols are used, for example rose, joy, worm, storm, love and destroy. I am sure that each one of these holds a different meaning for each person who reads this poem. Symbols give you the power to experience, to feel and to see objects and situations that you have never known. Your only limit being your own imagination. Everyone of these experiences are unique, individual and personalized. Each holds something special and meaningful....

And so on. This is a simple act of theoretical substitution and Steve celebrates his liberation from formalism, and indeed from any disciplined form of reading with every Hallmark cliche in the book. What he is forgetting, of course, is that, while every reading is, and cannot help but be, unique and all the rest, it will not be a "reading" at all if "your only limit is your imagination"—that is, if the language of the poem is not also accorded some power of guidance and limitation, as well as of imaginative stimulation. What follows is an extract from a paper that I take to be the product of a powerful imagination which ends up prefering its

own limits to those of the poem's language:

> Why this worm has destroyed the rose I do not have a definite answer for, perhaps because the rose is sick and the worm appears to replace the life that is diminising. Or the rose may be tired of the rose getting all the recognition for its beauty. Whatever the reason this rose is destroyed I did not care to know. What this poem did for me is celebrate the life of the worm. I overcame my predisposition of thinking of the worm as only a slimy, ugly creature. I saw the worm as a wonderful living and loving organism that too deserves recognition for being. I might say this worm symbolized life in the poem. Certainly not the meaning of life, but just a celebration of it....

This is a lively and engaged response. Yet, as he goes the way of his strong personal identification with the worm, this writer forgets, or perhaps suppresses the awful paradox that this particular worm is both lover and killer, that it is part of its nature as "a wonderful living and loving organism" to destroy what it loves.

Reader-response, on this showing anyway, can begin to look as incomplete, pedagogically, as new criticism, though in an inverse way. If new criticism reads through the surface of the text to the immanent meanings inside, reader-response bounces off that surface into the meaning-making activity of the reader. The reader, in effect, takes the place of the text as the "realm of meaning."

I am aware that this criticism could not fairly be made of Louise Rosenblatt's "transactional" theory of reading literature (The Reader, the Text, the Poem [Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978]). Her approach could be said to seek to integrate the discipline of close reading with the openness of personal response. One student this semester, in fact, arrived at a conception of reading very like Rosenblatt's. This was, of course, after we had explored the implications of both new-critical and reader-response approaches in class:

> I have always viewed reading as a passive activity in which the reader just assimulated knowledge by pronouncing the written words silently to himself. But, as I worked out my "reading" of this poem, I realized that reading is not a passive process at all. It is a very active internal dialogue between the words on the paper

> and the different meanings which the reader assigns to these words. During a person's lifetime, he or she assigns different meanings, connotations, images and ideas to each word he or she encounters. These meanings not only differ from person to person, but differ in the individual as well. Each word may evoke different meanings to a single individual at different times. In the process of reading, the reader juggles these various meanings to fit the context in which those words are written. There is a sort of unconscious dialogue going on inside the reader as he encounters words and assigns meaning to them by a process of elimination which takes place according to their context in the text which the author has placed them. I feel that this type of dialogue is clearly evident, if not purposely exaggerated, in poetry.

On the basis of this theory, John went on to provide an interpretation of what he saw as two mutually supporting levels of meaning in "The Sick Rose": the visual and the symbolic. It is a very fruitful reading and it may seem perversely ungrateful of me to now go on to criticize it as suffering from a joint limitation of both new-criticism and reader-response--and that is their fundamental equation of reading with interpretation. Jane Tompkins has argued this point:

> What is most striking about reader-response criticism...is [its] failure to break out of the mold into which critical writing was cast by the formalist identification of criticism with explication. Interpretation reigns supreme both in teaching and in publication just as it did when New Criticism was in its heyday.... In the classroom, an account of one student's moment-by-moment experience of the text, though it differs in every substantive respect from a formalist analysis...still treats meaning as the goal of critical inquiry. (Reader-Response Criticism [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1980], 225)

It is perhaps hard for those of us trained in the various schools of literary criticism to accept that interpretation is only one of the uses of literature, and a rather recent and narrow use at that. Our obsession with meaning, with finding it or constructing it, makes it difficult for us to imagine, or perhaps to remember, what besides interpretation poetry might be good for--a "what" which includes uses as varied as, on the one hand, the enjoyment of pleasurable speaking which clearly informs children's rhymes (and indeed Sandy's experience of "The Raven"), and, on the other hand, the use of poetry for political intervention , a tradition

which includes Milton and Marvell as well as Robert Bly and Carolyn Forche. The focus on meaning also makes it difficult for us to teach what might be more useful for students who are unlikely, no matter how well we teach, to become regular readers of poetry, and that is the workings and effects of language as a social and material production. For if in new criticism language is conceived as transparent—a window onto meanings—and if in reader-response language is a reflecting surface—a mirror of the self—, neither can help us or our students see language itself —the language we use and the language we are used by. To enable students to read words before reading through them or reading themselves in them, I have needed a theory which insists on the materiality of language, on words as things rather than instruments of communication or reflection. Semiotics, which treats language as a system of signs, is helpful here in its separation of signifier and signified in the constitution of the sign: if we take the "signifier" to be a word's sound structures in speech and its physical notations in writing, and if we take the "signified" to be the concepts symbolized by the word, then poetry can be seen as a form of language-using marked by the precedence of the signifier, that is to say, by the foregrounding of sound effects and physical spacing on the page, etc. (And I am borrowing here from Anthony Easthope's Poetry as Discourse [London: Methuen, 1983].) None of these poetic effects of signifiers have any determinate relationship to signified meanings. Rhyme, for example, discovers a connection between words on the basis of their sound alone, one which may or may not align with a connection in meaning.

It is true, of course, that New Criticism always paid attention to elements such as rhyme, rhythm, repetition, and so on. The limitation, though, is that it attended to them only as servants of meaning, that is to say only when the signifier aligned neatly with and amplified the signified, in accordance with Pope's injunction that "the Sound must seem an Echo to the Sense." When signifiers are allowed their precedence—that precedence—that is, when they are

not entirely subordinated to sense--they can be read for the pleasure of their own effects as well as for their role in signification. Let me quote a stanza from "The Raven" as a test of this:

> Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing,
> Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before;
> But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token,
> And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, "Lenore."
> This I whispered, and an echo murmured back the word, "Lenore".
> Merely this and nothing more.

The effects of language here call attention to themselves and are far in excess of what is required for the poem's sense or theme.

I turn to semiotics, then, or to this reduced version of it, to train my students' awareness of what poems are made of besides the "thoughts" and "feelings" of the poet. I want them to see how poems work in ways which cannot be accounted for solely as "communication" of those "thoughts and feelings." Attention to signifiers and their interrelationships also serves to inhibit the rush to interpretation which I believe short circuits so much student reading of poetry. It frustrates the desire to thematize a poem, to reduce it to a coherence before exploring it as what it most manifestly is--a structure of language, and a dynamic and shifting one at that.

The point of all this, though, is not now to offer semiotics as the more complete pedagogy I have been after. Semiotics is in some ways absurdly limited: its "bracketing of the real" is unacceptable as anything more than an analytic strategy. And I would want to expose its limitations in class, as I have with new criticism and reader-response. This is not at all, it seems to me now, the kind of odyssey through which one ever gets back home to some secure and satisfying theoretical ground on which to base a pedagogy. The best I can now imagine is to invite my students on the journey with me. Members of next semester's class in

"Reading Poetry" will be working through a sequence of writing assignments in which they will articulate their conceptions of what poetry is and how one reads it, test those conceptions against their reading experiences in the course, develop new theories and practice the reading strategies they imply, critiquing their blindspots, and so on, in a recapitulation of the dialectic of frustration and possibility which keeps me going as a teacher and reader of poetry.

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